

Raskolnikov’s Return to Nature

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ABSTRACT

In this paper I suggest a partial reading of *Crime and Punishment* which draws on the philosophy of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. I outline the Rousseauan idea of a “return to nature,” and then apply it to the case of Raskolnikov, as a means of revealing important commonalities between Rousseau’s and Dostoevsky’s thoughts about society. I maintain that a Rousseauan perspective can help us to understand the way in which *Crime and Punishment* connects with Dostoevsky’s social-philosophical concerns, through outlining the mechanics of how the story of Raskolnikov can be seen as serving Dostoevsky’s attack on Nihilism and illustrating his positive social ideal, the altruistic Christian brotherhood.

Keywords: Dostoevsky, Rousseau, society, nature, conscience.

In this paper I suggest a partial reading of *Crime and Punishment* which draws on the philosophy of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Specifically, I outline a concept which can be derived from Rousseau’s writings, which I call the “return to nature,” and then apply it to the case of Raskolnikov, as a means of revealing important commonalities between Rousseau’s and Dostoevsky’s thoughts about society. I maintain that a Rousseauan perspective can help us to understand the way in which *Crime and Punishment* connects with Dostoevsky’s social-philosophical concerns, through outlining the mechanics of how the story of Raskolnikov can be seen as serving Dostoevsky’s attack on Nihilism and illustrating his positive social ideal, the altruistic Christian brotherhood.

I do not intend to say anything particularly new about either Rousseau or Dostoevsky, but merely to point out what I think is an interesting coincidence of their ideas. As well as being interesting in itself, this coincidence is surprising because most Dostoevsky scholars, as well as Dostoevsky himself, have believed Rousseau and Dostoevsky to be philosophical antipodes. This is largely because (as far as social philosophy is concerned) Dostoevsky, like most of his contemporaries, could not help but see Rousseau only as a predecessor of the French revolution and the radical socialists who Dostoevsky came to see as the greatest threat to Russian society and culture—a limited perspective which does not do him much justice as a thinker. Unlike Tolstoy, what’s more, Dostoevsky probably never read much Rousseau (Fink, 2004: 277, 281), which is reflected in his writings: references to the Genevan philosopher are not at all infrequent, but reveal a lack of deep insight into the man and his works. In *Notes from Underground*, to take one example, Rousseau is alluded to twice: on the first occasion (Dostoevsky, 2009: 10), the narrator ironically associates the despised “man of action,” who is active only through ignorance of the stupidity and groundlessness of his actions, with *l’homme de la nature et de la vérité* (the man of nature and truth), as Rousseau is labelled on his tomb in the Panthéon (a fact which Dostoevsky recalls in *Winter Notes on Summer Impressions* (Dostoevsky, 1997: 61)); on the second, he echoes Heine’s opinion that in the *Confessions* Rousseau exaggerated his own faults out of vanity and boastfulness (Dostoevsky, 2009: 36). These two references encapsulate Dostoevsky’s image of Rousseau:

the naive disciple of “nature” and “truth” who failed to understand either of them in all their complexity, and whose views about life and society were consequently misguided and pernicious. This is not the place to investigate Dostoevsky’s opinion of Rousseau, however, but only to describe one of the ways in which their ideas may be seen to overlap. It seems to me that this kind of philosophical comparison should serve as a foundation for further research into the history of ideas surrounding these two important figures.

To begin with a generality, we may observe that both Rousseau and Dostoevsky believed that good societies could only be made of virtuous individuals who would subordinate their personal interests to the interests of society. Though this virtue manifested in different ways for the two thinkers, both were concerned fundamentally with altruism and self-sacrifice. For Rousseau this ideal was to be realized in devoted citizens modelled on the Spartans and Romans (Rousseau, 1979: 40); for Dostoevsky, in altruistic Christians devoted to helping one another. This view is stated very clearly in *Winter Notes*, published three years before *Crime and Punishment*, in which Dostoevsky contrasts his own social ideal of the organic Christian brotherhood with the artificial *fraternité* he attributes to the socialists (Dostoevsky, 1988: 48-52). Indeed, Dostoevsky’s positive social philosophy (as distinct from his concrete political opinions) seems to consist of little more than this utopian vision, wherein the triumph of Christian altruism in all individuals leads ineluctably, by means not specifiable in advance, to the triumph of peace and harmony in society. My aim here is to outline, with reference to Rousseau’s similar ideas, the way in which *Crime and Punishment* illustrates this social-philosophical significance of personal virtue, and thereby links up with Dostoevsky’s more explicitly social-philosophical works like *Winter Notes*. I shall firstly summarize the relevant aspects of Rousseau’s thought, and then move on to consider *Crime and Punishment* from this perspective.

According to Rousseau, humans are naturally good but are corrupted by civilization. The mechanism by which we are all corrupted is *amour-propre*, self-love, which for Rousseau is truly the root of all evil (e.g. Rousseau, 1987: 64).⁴⁹ I think *amour-propre* can best be defined as *self-esteem which depends on comparisons with other people* (cf. Cooper, 1999: 149); thus it arises out of civilization when people become culturally sophisticated enough to compete with one another in various specialized activities (Rousseau, 1987: 53f.). For example, if the only way I can respect and esteem myself as a student is by comparing myself favourably to other students and academics, then my self-esteem is a manifestation of *amour-propre*. It’s easy to see how this kind of self-love could (and often does) lead to such negative attitudes as envy, vanity, pride, arrogance, contempt, etc., according to whether I deem myself to be better or worse than my peers. As we shall see, it also stands in the way of good social progress, for it causes us to chase after chimerical ideals—such as Raskolnikov’s ideal of Napoleon—which only aggravate our pride and vanity, rather than make us better and more virtuous people (e.g. Rousseau, 1979: 268f.).

Rousseau was concerned with the problem of *amour-propre* in many different ways, and the need to solve it informs all of his philosophical writings—about politics, education, morals, religion etc. Here I will focus on the problem insofar as it pertains to individual

⁴⁹ It can also give rise to good things, like civic virtue, but only under special circumstances and only if it is manipulated in certain ways (Cooper, 1999: 14). For present purposes we can assume that *amour-propre* is straightforwardly bad.

psychology and morality, which we can call the “problem of the good life”—bearing in mind that the “good life” as an individual pursuit is a prerequisite for the good society, and thus, for Rousseau as for Dostoevsky, has a decisive social-philosophical significance. Writing of Rousseau, Laurence Cooper distinguishes what he calls the “two components of the good life,” one of which is negative and the other positive (Cooper, 1999: 30ff.). The negative component consists simply in maintaining concord with our natural goodness, which in practice means suppressing or controlling *amour-propre*. It is not an ideal in itself but is merely a necessary condition for the positive component. The latter includes “the exercise and development of faculties, the broadening of ideas, the ennoblement of sentiment, and the elevation of soul” (Cooper, 1999: 31; Rousseau, 1987: 151), which is to say, everything good and virtuous of which humans are by nature capable.

For Rousseau, *conscience* is the mechanism which allows us to attain this ideal. According to Cooper’s analysis (1999: 80ff.), Rousseau’s notion of conscience is extremely broad, and in addition to providing ordinary moral guidance, “is to the soul what instinct is to the body” (Rousseau, 1979: 286): it provides guidance in all humanly important matters—morality, religion, aesthetics etc. In general, its job is to “keep psychic energy from overflowing its natural channels” (Cooper, 1999: 100), in other words, to ensure that our faculties develop in accordance with our good human nature, as required by the second component of the good life. *Amour-propre* undermines this project because it encourages us to do bad, selfish things; more importantly, it is so powerful that it inevitably subordinates everything to the goal of its own satisfaction—in the psychological economy, it usurps the administrative role which ought to be played by conscience, and so diverts our “psychic energy” from its “natural channels.” This is why the negative component of the good life, the suppression or control of *amour-propre*, is necessary for the attainment of the positive: it liberates the conscience and empowers it to guide the development of our faculties. Thus the two components together produce the best possible development of human nature, a synthesis of natural goodness and civilized culture.

The question is then how we are supposed to proceed towards this goal. Ideally we must be educated from infancy so that *amour-propre* never gains a hold on us in the first place. However, Rousseau’s book on education, *Emile*, also contains advice applicable to those of us who have already been corrupted by civilization, and therefore cannot benefit from its educational program (which is in any case almost entirely impractical and impossible to implement on a large scale). This appears mainly in the famous section titled “The Profession of Faith of the Savoyard Vicar” (Rousseau, 1979: 266ff.), in which Rousseau describes the teachings of an unorthodox clergyman who has managed to succeed, to a large extent, in returning to the path described by human nature. Much the same advice is also given directly by Rousseau in his *Moral Letters* (Rousseau, 2006: 175-203). One of the principle teachings of the Savoyard Vicar and of the *Moral Letters* is intellectual humility—recognition of the fact that we humans are not able to understand everything we might want to understand with our limited human intellects. To attain this humility, the Vicar begins with something like a Cartesian method of universal doubt, by which he calls into question everything which, in his former intellectual arrogance, he assumed he knew (Rousseau, 1979: 267). Unlike Descartes, however, instead of relying on an abstract process of reasoning to rebuild his convictions, he relies on his *sentiments*, which is to say, on the promptings of his *conscience*,

in the broad sense described above. The conscience is not philosophically sophisticated, and for this reason Rousseau thinks we should in general remain silent about all the esoteric philosophical issues which we cannot easily resolve, and limit ourselves to questions which any honest, reasonable person can answer with “what in the simplicity of your heart appears to you to be the truth” (Rousseau, 1979: 313). With respect to every issue which actually matters to our lives—such as those of morality and religion—he believes that our conscience will supply us with a firm intuition of what is right and wrong. For example, on the question of whether we have free will, he says “[i]t would be vain to try to use reason to try to destroy this sentiment in me. It is stronger than any evidence” (Rousseau, 1979: 272).

So although Descartes started in the right place, by doubting everything he could possibly doubt and thereby abandoning his prejudices, he ended up embroiled again in metaphysical speculation (Rousseau, 2006: 186). His system is an example of “proud philosophy” because, contrary to Descartes’ professed intention, it develops into regions of thought which no-one can confidently navigate. It thus represents a refusal to acknowledge the natural limitations of the human intellect. Only a truly *humble* thinker like the Savoyard Vicar, whose reasoning never proceeds without the approval of his conscience, will remain within the bounds of what is determined by human nature to be good and useful for the cultivation of ourselves, and, therefore, the cultivation of society.

Thus does Rousseau think we can come as close as possible to fulfilling the requirements of the good life. Like the naturally educated Emile, we could in this way be capable of real social virtue and citizenship.⁵⁰ The state of doubt the Vicar begins with, in which he humbles himself in the awareness of his own limitations and trusts himself to the sentiments of his conscience, is the means by which he fulfils the negative component of the good life, and this what I will call the *return to nature*. I will now move on to describe the way in which I think Dostoevsky illustrates ideas very much like these in *Crime and Punishment*. Again, I’m not suggesting that Dostoevsky was directly influenced by Rousseau, or attempting to trace any indirect influence that may have occurred (Rousseau’s thought was certainly in the air Dostoevsky breathed), but only that Dostoevsky’s ideas are strikingly similar to Rousseau’s.

Throughout the novel, Raskolnikov is evidently dominated by *amour-propre* in the form of extreme pride. Pride deriving from *amour-propre* is pride which depends on one’s standing relative to other people, but only such people as one respects. For Raskolnikov, there is one person in particular who he respects and who his pride therefore depends on, and that is Napoleon Bonaparte. Thus he doesn’t mind whether common folk laugh at him as he rambles half-delirious around the streets in his outmoded top hat. Raskolnikov’s self-respect demands only that he can, like Napoleon, trample over ordinary people in the pursuit of his grand designs; and this is why, as he admits later, he commits the murder: in order to test the hypothesis of his greatness, to see whether he really can compare favourably to the übermensch Napoleon (Dostoevsky, 2003: 499).

Consequently, Raskolnikov’s pride stifles and usurps the role of his conscience in accordance with Rousseau’s predictions. The need to satisfy his pride causes him, firstly,

⁵⁰ Except that Emile doesn’t really become a citizen, because there is no nation in the modern world worth serving (Rousseau, 1979: 40)—there are too few people *capable of citizenship*. Thus he and the Savoyard Vicar must both, in their own ways, make do with being good to other people and fulfilling their duties to society in the limited capacity of private individuals (Rousseau, 1979: 265, 473).

to unconsciously formulate the murder as a test of his greatness; and secondly, in the form of “proud philosophy,” to consciously rationalize the crime in terms of popular Nihilist utilitarianism. At the same time, his reliance on these ethical doctrines prevents him from hearing the voice of his conscience, which would otherwise have stopped him from acting. His crime was never sanctioned by his conscience; he is so far removed from it, however, that he mistakes the conclusions of his intellect for the approval of his conscience. This is why he can honestly say, like Svidrigailov (Dostoevsky, 2003: 337, 348), that his conscience is clear, and that he can only perceive his crime as a stupid mistake and not as a *moral* transgression (Dostoevsky, 2003: 647). Thus Dostoevsky illustrates the way in which ethical theories masquerade as real morality, and take the place of Raskolnikov’s conscience in determining his moral attitudes. As Joseph Frank remarks: “It is not only that his *ideas* run counter to the instinctive promptings of his moral-emotive sensibility; these ideas momentarily transform him into someone for whom moral conscience ceases to operate as part of his personality” (Frank, 1995: 107).

Raskolnikov is redeemed, ultimately, by something like a return to nature in the manner of the Savoyard Vicar. Just like the Vicar, he goes through a period of doubt in which his beliefs are called into question. In fact, this period occupies the whole novel until the Epilogue. To begin with, his Nihilist ethical theories are continually undermined by his own acts of kindness (Frank, 1995: 106f.)—he is moved in spite of them to assist the Marmeladov family (Dostoevsky, 2003: 34), as well as the young woman being pursued by a sexual predator (Dostoevsky, 2003: 57ff.). Then he is forced, as a result of his failure maintain composure after the murder, to admit that he is not a “great man” like Napoleon. All of this points to a basic incompatibility between his theories and the reality of human nature. Only the need to satisfy his *amour-propre* keeps him from realising this fact straight away, and keeps alive the conflict between his conscience and his proud intellect. And like the Vicar, Raskolnikov finally attains humility, when in the Epilogue he abandons his whole system of thought and begins to trust his feelings instead of his thoughts (Dostoevsky, 2003: 655f.). This is what I call his return to nature. Afterwards, he loses his sense of shame, which was born of his wounded pride, and begins to love Sonya according to the natural inclinations of his heart.

Interestingly, the immediate catalyst for this transformation, which is normally considered only in terms of its purely religious significance, is literally *nature*—the natural environment. He enjoys a moment of solitude outside the prison fortress, before starting work, looking out over the river and the steppe (Dostoevsky, 2003: 654):

Over there, in the boundless steppe awash with sunlight, he could see the yurts of the nomad tribesmen like barely perceptible black dots. Over there was freedom, over there lived other people, quite different from those who lived here, over there time itself seemed to have stopped, as though the days of Abraham and his flocks had never passed.

The significance of the scene is twofold. Firstly, the reference to “the days of Abraham” lends it a religious aspect, and reveals that Raskolnikov is currently preoccupied with spiritual matters. Secondly, however, we should note that the nomads themselves are not Christians; nor is the environment overtly religious—Raskolnikov is not in a church but surrounded by the steppe. In fact, the nomads belong to the stage of human cultural development which Rousseau thought was the best so far attained on earth, namely, the “savage” stage, half way between the pure state of nature and our corrupt civilization. Rousseau frequently

glorified the lives of savage peoples as a means of condemning the excesses of modern civilization (e.g. in the two *Discourses*—Rousseau, 1987: 1-109). The Kirghiz nomads and their natural surroundings seem to have precisely this kind of significance for Raskolnikov and Dostoevsky. They represent humanity without civilization, living freely, simply and peacefully on the “boundless steppe awash with sunlight,” reflecting in concrete reality the new state of Raskolnikov’s soul: although he is not yet a Christian, he is much closer than he was before, because, like the nomads, he has attained a morally neutral middle ground between the corruption of the Nihilists and the pious religiosity of Sonya and his fellow convicts.

Dostoevsky believed that the Russian people, in spite of their rough exterior, were the last bastion of the “true image of Christ,” and thus held the key to a moral resurrection of the civilized world, beginning with educated Russians like Raskolnikov (a central theme in the journalistic writings, e.g. Dostoevsky, 1964: 79). It will not here be possible to enter into the similarities and differences between Dostoevsky’s and Rousseau’s religious ideas; at the very least, however, we can say that both of them venerated Christ as a *moral* ideal. Rousseau thought that the teachings of the Gospels were “in perfect harmony with the conclusions of reason and nature” (Grimsley, 1968: 71), in other words, with the dictates of conscience. The Savoyard Vicar derives from the sentiments of his conscience a “natural religion” which includes (deistic) belief in God, immortality, and basic Christian morality of the kind espoused by Christ himself. (Note that Rousseau should in this respect be distinguished from those Enlightenment deists who derived their natural religion from pure reason, rather than reason informed by sentiment.) So from a Rousseauan perspective, we can say that having accomplished a return to nature, Raskolnikov is now in a position to perceive, using his conscience, the Christian moral ideal carried by Sonya and the pious convicts; thus the novel ends with his contemplating the possibility of sharing Sonya’s convictions. He can now begin to fulfil the positive component of the good life by realising anew the potential of his intellect and imagination, but this time with humility and in accordance with his conscience, and therefore with the example of Christ as a new moral foundation. And, returning to our original social-philosophical concerns, he can now perceive Christian brotherhood as an ideal and begin to strive towards it in practice.

In fact, the appellation “return to nature” is lent further justification by the fact that, in *Winter Notes*, Dostoevsky writes that the ideal of brotherhood “is a law of nature; normally man tends towards this” (Dostoevsky, 1988: 49). The badly civilized West has completely lost this element of human nature. But in Russia, the natural disposition for brotherhood has been preserved along with Orthodox Christianity—and if Russia is not yet a perfect brotherhood this is because the educated classes have temporarily, as a result of Peter’s Westernizing reforms, abandoned and forgotten this part of their heritage. By morally reuniting with the Russian people, they can recover it and put it into practice. But first it is necessary to perceive the ideal of brotherhood as an ideal, which is not easy for progressively educated Russians like Raskolnikov. To say nothing of the humble self-abnegation needed to put oneself, as Sonya does, wholly at the service of one’s fellows, it takes great intellectual humility merely to discard one’s theories of right and wrong and trust one’s conscience instead; for this ideal is not a matter of reasoning and calculations of advantage, but is on the contrary, as Dostoevsky writes in *Winter Notes*, a “humiliation of reason [*razum*]” (Dostoevsky, 1988: 50). It requires

of each individual a return to nature by which the conscience is liberated.

Although it has not been possible for me to pursue the comparison very far here, I think it is clear that on the matters discussed above Dostoevsky did not think so differently from Rousseau, in spite of the general consensus that “Dostoevsky despised him” (Fink, 2004: 275). Looking to the broader contexts of their works, we can say that Dostoevsky condemned the Nihilist doctrines of the day in just the same way as Rousseau condemned the “proud philosophy” of the Enlightenment: both of them fought against the subordination of morality to science and intellectualist philosophy, and both urged their contemporaries not to rely too heavily on abstract reasoning when dealing with matters of basic human importance. And they agreed that if these considerations could be observed in practice, by each individual, human society could be radically improved. Thus, for Dostoevsky, Raskolnikov’s personal regeneration is at the same time a reconciliation with Sonya. Raskolnikov thereby illustrates Dostoevsky’s ideal of a moral reunification with the Russian people, who had not been affected by the various theories circulating among the educated classes, and had therefore, in a sense, preserved the conscience of the nation against the Westernizing developments of the Petersburg period. In contrast, Rousseau did not have such faith in any existing people; but Dostoevsky’s ideal of a morally unified Russia is to my mind a broadly Rousseauan one.

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